A CHRISTMAS POSTSCRIPT BY DR. SEUSS AND ST. LUKE

December 29, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

"...'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand..." -Luke 2:49, 50 (NRSV)

Someone, it seems, is always worrying that we might be having too much fun at Christmas, or that the fun we're having is not connected tightly enough to the birth of Jesus, or that Christmas fun is not consistent with Christmas theology.

The protesters have objected to the secularization of Christmas, the materialization of Christmas, the exploitation of Christmas, in methods draconian and modest. Among the more dramatic have to be the Puritans who, in addition to inventing Thanksgiving, worried so much about Christmas fun that they passed a law in 1659 banning any Christmas celebrating and fining anyone caught merry-making five shillings.

Two years earlier the British Parliament abolished Christmas as a public holiday, and before that celebrating Christmas was a punishable offense in John Calvin's Geneva.

But perhaps the most famous Christmas protester of all was the Grinch, the unforgettable character in Why the Grinch Stole Christmas.

The creator of the Grinch, Theodore Geisel, known and loved as Dr. Seuss, died this year.

> If you do not know him,
> shame on you!
> His books are best sellers
> And you should own two!

The wonderful thing about Dr. Seuss was that his books were about important ideas. The other wonderful thing about Dr. Seuss is that his books are fun to read. Poetry is an oral, audible, sensory medium: You must speak it and hear it in order to get

it. Dr. Seuss knew how to write in a way that simply insisted on being spoken.

"Do you like green eggs and ham?

"I do not like them, Sam-I-am.
I do not like green eggs and ham.

"Would you like them here or there?

"I would not like them here or there.
I would not like them anywhere.

"I do not like green eggs and ham.
I do not like them, Sam-I-am."
[Green Eggs and Ham]

Now that's language demanding to be read aloud. Dr. Seuss's secret was marketing it as children's literature so that adults would have a legitimate excuse for doing something most of us would not otherwise find it possible to do, namely sit down alone and read out loud...

"On the last day of summer
ten hours before fall,
my grandfather took me
out to the Wall.
For a while he stood silent
Then finally he said,
with a very sad shake
of his very old head,
'As you know, on this side of the Wall
we are Yooks.
On the far side of this Wall
live the Zooks.'
Then my grandfather said,
'It's high time that you knew
of the terribly horrible thing that Zooks do.
In every Zook house and in every Zook town
every Zook eats his bread
with the butter side down.'"
[The Butter Battle Book]

That is from the Butter Battle Book which is one of the clearest and most cogent analyses of the arms race, the rise of militarism and the role played by the military/industrial complex in this nation.

So - he will be missed, and his books will continue to be read, particularly the one which put him at least in sympathy with the Christmas protesters.

The Grinch was one of those difficult and unpleasant people who worry that the rest of us are having too much fun at Christmas.

> "The Grinch hated Christmas!
> The whole Christmas season!
> Now, please don't ask why.
> No one quite knows the reason.
> It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
> It could be perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
> But I think that the most likely reason of all
> may have been that his heart was two sizes too small."

So the Grinch decided to do something about it.

In Who-ville Christmas was celebrated with great enthusiasm, a mountain of toys in each house, a great feast which all the Whos attended, and after the feast, singing, in which all the Whos joined, holding hands.

The Grinch hated that most... that singing...

So on Christmas Eve, after every Who was asleep, he came down from his mountain, down every chimney, stole all the presents, toys, treats, decorations, trees, stuffed all of it back up each chimney, and at the end, reached down and took even the Christmas log from each fireplace, and carried it all up the mountain to dump it over the other side.

Chicago scholar, Susan Thistlethwaite, in an appreciative year-end essay in Christianity and Crisis asked, "What can we in religion say about the flat-out loss of Christmas as a dramatic ritual of the Christian year that the Grinch does not say in a much more vigorous and vinegary way?" [Christianity and Crisis, 12/11/91, p. 379]

The Grinch is actually one voice in a very old chorus of voices, from within the Christian church: warning that the message and meaning of Christmas can get lost in the midst of the celebration of Christmas, observing that by a kind of curious perverse logic, the bigger Christmas becomes, the more distance appears between the festivities and their origins. The solution has often been radical. Do away with Christmas altogether. No Christmas is better than this pagan circus this year-end orgy of spending.

And while that may be taking your indignation too far, the thought does occur, does it not, when the horns are blaring at Chestnut and Michigan, and the cabbies are cursing at the pedestrians who won't obey the traffic lights, and the Santa Claus drummer is back flailing away, and two drunks are fighting, and a homeless man is rummaging through the garbage can in front of the

church, jostled and shoved by oversized Crate and Barrel boxes and Henri Bendel shopping bags.

The thought does occur; but my proposal is that this whole issue is anticipated by and addressed by the writer who is the one responsible for Christmas - St. Luke himself.

New Testament scholars conclude that Luke, an elegant, scholarly writer, wrote his account of the life and ministry of Jesus a generation after the fact and started with Jesus as a thirty-year-old man. My suggestion was and is that when Luke's little book circulated within the early Christian community, when Mary, Jesus' mother read it - and she alone still alive who was there, who bore him, nursed him, raised him, nurtured him, parented him through childhood and adolescence, young adulthood - she, Mary, sat Luke down and told him stories he didn't know and suggested that perhaps his account of her son's life might be more accurate if it included the real beginning. So she told him about her pregnancy, and how frightening and awesome it was. And she told him about her dear old Aunt Elizabeth, and how they were pregnant together and how the whole business left her Uncle Zachariah speechless. And she told him about the trip to Bethlehem and the inn and the stable and the shepherds. She told about taking the baby to the Temple for dedication and she told him about an incident that happened when Jesus was twelve and the family had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. And Luke thought about it, and wrote it down and inserted it, as a proper introduction to the main story. And he included in the story of the birth this single curious incident that happened twelve years after Jesus was born and eighteen years before he began his public ministry. (Please understand that no one knows how the material came to be written down and that my suggestion about Mary's role is based only on speculation.)

The whole family - uncles, aunts, cousins, brothers and sisters - traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. It was a festive, happy occasion, a kind of mobile family reunion. When they headed home, after a day's travel, Mary and Joseph notice that Jesus is not there. So they head back, another day's journey, to find him in the Temple conversing with the leaders and teachers of the law. Parents will understand how happy they were and then quickly, how angry. Children rather enjoy the fact that he is holding his own with adults. Adolescents are delighted that Jesus challenged his parents' authority and was strong enough to assert his own individuality.

It is a wonderfully human story.

The definitive scholarly study of Luke's nativity account is by Raymond E. Brown of Union Theological Seminary. Professor Brown asks this basic question: What is the story doing in the nativity section? Why did Luke include it? His answer puts St.

Luke in close company with Dr. Seuss. Luke wants to make sure his readers understand what the real Christmas issue is. From start to finish Luke wants his readers to ask about the identity of this person - this Christ. "What Child is this?" is Luke's defining question. Who is this who answers the barren longing of poor people? Who is this who humble shepherds recognize? Brown concludes that the story of Jesus in the Temple is there to amplify and to keep that question alive.

He is one who will come to the Temple. That Temple, by the way, was not like going to church. Rather - in Jerusalem - a visit to the Temple was like a pilgrimage to the Capitol Building, Congress, the Supreme Court, White House. It was the political, economic, moral as well as spiritual heart of the nation. In fact, that's the way Jesus and his people thought. When you are at the political and economic heart of things, you are dealing with the spirit.

So Luke, at the outset, is defining this Christ and following this Christ, as a demanding, exhilarating, often complicated encounter with human life at its most human. The story of his birth, so tender, so lovely, so meek and mild, is not complete, Luke is saying, until you understand that the baby will come into the center of life. As a matter of fact, Letty Russell [The Christian Century, 12/4/91] observes that this story looks forward to another time when he will come to the Temple and confront the religious leaders again, and this time he will overturn tables and physically throw them out, and in the process, seal his own death warrant. So, it seems to me, if you simply stay with Luke's Christmas story long enough, you will have something of your holiday sentimentality at least corrected and your theology challenged.

The temptation, of course, is to go to Bethlehem and never leave. In a wonderful commentary on classic Christmas art, Frederick Buechner looks at a picture of the flight into Egypt and observes that it appears for all the world like a pleasant family outing instead of a frightening escape from death in the nick of time. "As long as he stays the babe in the manger," Buechner says, "he asks nothing harder than to love him and accept his love, and the temptation is thus to keep him a babe forever, for our sakes and for his sake too." [The Faces of Jesus, p. 67]

Well, you don't have to react violently against the way the secular celebration really misses the point. You don't have to be a Grinch. All you have to do is read the whole story or even just the whole nativity, and you will make the connection between the birth and the man, between the heart-warming sentiments of Bethlehem and the heart-stirring story in Galilee and the heart-breaking passion in Jerusalem. All you have to do is read the whole story and you will begin, perhaps, to hear his claim on

your life and to know his presence in places as political and economic as the Jerusalem Temple and your own life, your decisions about what to do with it, for instance, and how to vote, and how to use your resources, and how to conduct yourself sexually, ethically,... that's what Jesus - twelve-year-old Jesus - in the Temple means.

You know, when you strip away the cultural accouterments, the whole commercial boondoggle which it has become, something pure and good and holy is always there.

That is what happened in Who-ville, by the way. The Grinch had pushed and pulled and shoved Christmas - all the decorations, toys, trees - to the top of the mountain and just as he was about to push it over the side, he stopped to listen to the sound coming up the mountain from Who-ville.

> "'They're just waking up. I know just what they'll do!
> Their mouths will hang open a minute or two.
> Then the Whos down in Who-ville will all cry Boo-Hoo!
> That's a noise,' grinned the Grinch,
> 'That I simply Must hear!'
> So he paused.
> And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
> And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
> It started in low.
> Then it started to grow...
> But the sound wasn't sad!
> Why, this sound sounded merry!
> It couldn't be so!
> But it WAS merry! VERY!
> He stared down at Who-ville!
> The Grinch popped his eyes!
> Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!
> Every Who down in Who-ville,
> the tall and the small,
> Was singing!
> Without any presents at all!
> He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!
> IT CAME!
> Somehow or other,
> it came just the same!
> And the Grinch,
> with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
> stood puzzling and puzzling:
> 'How could it be so?
> It came without ribbons!
> It came without tags!
> It came without packages,
> boxes or bags!'
> And he puzzled three hours,
> till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something
he hadn't before!
'Maybe Christmas,' he thought,
'doesn't come from a store.
'Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!'
And what happened then...?
Well...in Who-ville they say
that the Grinch's small heart
grew three sizes that day!"

There are perhaps more elegant ways of making the point, but probably none more effective.

As the season begins to fade and the decorations come down, and the tree is discarded, or packed away, hear the postscript, which so many wise ones in the past know is the point of the story.

The love which came in the child of Bethlehem became the holy love of Jesus the Christ.

The sentiment it occasions in our hearts wants to become the passionate discipleship of mature men and women to this Lord and his kingdom on earth.

And the lovely singing which was carried to the top of the mountain on the soft breeze of an early Christmas morning continues... that insistent lovely caroling that nothing seems able finally to drown out, and which asks:

"What Child is this?"

"This, this is Christ the King."

Amen.